

Assisi 2011: A decisive stand for human dignity

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Below we publish the text of Pope Benedict XVI's intervention Thursday October 27th in the basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli, Assisi, before representatives of the world's religions and **non-believers:**

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Distinguished Heads and Representatives of Churches, Ecclesial Communities and World Religions, Dear Friends, Twenty-five years have passed since Blessed Pope John Paul II first invited representatives of the world's religions to Assisi to pray for peace. What has happened in the meantime? What is the state of play with regard to peace today? At that time the great threat to world peace came from the division of the earth into two mutually opposed blocs. A conspicuous symbol of this division was the Berlin Wall which traced the border between two worlds right through the heart of the city. In 1989, three years after Assisi, the wall came down, without bloodshed. Suddenly the vast arsenals that stood behind the wall were no longer significant. They had lost their terror. The peoples' will to freedom was stronger than the arsenals of violence. The question as to the causes of this dramatic change is complex and cannot be answered with simple formulae. But in addition to economic and political factors, the deepest reason for the event is a spiritual one: behind material might there were no longer any spiritual convictions. The will to freedom was ultimately stronger than the fear of violence, which now lacked any spiritual veneer. For this victory of freedom, which was also, above all, a victory of peace, we give thanks. What is more, this was not merely, nor even primarily, about the freedom to believe, although it did include this. To that extent we may in some way link all this to our prayer for peace. But what happened next? Unfortunately, we cannot say that freedom and peace have characterized the situation ever since. Even if there is no threat of a great war hanging over us at present, nevertheless the world is unfortunately full of discord. It is not only that sporadic wars are continually being fought – violence as such is potentially ever present and it is a characteristic feature of our world. Freedom is a great good. But the world of freedom has proved to be largely directionless, and not a few have misinterpreted freedom as somehow including freedom for violence. Discord has taken on new and frightening guises, and the struggle for freedom must engage us all in a new way. Let us try to identify the new faces of violence and discord more closely. It seems to me that, in broad strokes, we may distinguish two types of the new forms of violence, which are the very antithesis of each other in terms of their motivation and manifest a number of differences in detail. Firstly there is terrorism, for which in place of a great war there are targeted attacks intended to strike the opponent destructively at key points, with no regard for the lives of innocent human beings, who are cruelly killed or wounded in the process. In the eyes of the perpetrators, the overriding goal of damage to the enemy justifies any form of cruelty. Everything that had been commonly recognized and sanctioned in international law as the limit of violence is overruled. We know that terrorism is often religiously motivated and that the specifically religious character of the attacks is proposed as a justification for the reckless cruelty that considers itself entitled to discard the rules of morality for the sake of the intended "good". In this case, religion does not serve peace, but is used as justification for violence. The post-Enlightenment critique of religion has repeatedly maintained that religion is a cause of violence and in this way it has fuelled hostility towards religions. The fact that, in the case we are considering here, religion really does motivate violence should be profoundly disturbing to us as religious persons. In a way that is more subtle but no less cruel, we also see religion as the cause of violence when force is used by the defenders of one religion against others. The religious delegates who were assembled in Assisi in 1986 wanted to say, and we now repeat it emphatically and firmly: this is not the true nature of religion. It is the antithesis of religion and

contributes to its destruction. In response, an objection is raised: how do you know what the true nature of religion is? Does your assertion not derive from the fact that your religion has become a spent force? Others in their turn will object: is there such a thing as a common nature of religion that finds expression in all religions and is therefore applicable to them all? We must ask ourselves these questions, if we wish to argue realistically and credibly against religiously motivated violence. Herein lies a fundamental task for interreligious dialogue – an exercise which is to receive renewed emphasis through this meeting. As a Christian I want to say at this point: yes, it is true, in the course of history, force has also been used in the name of the Christian faith. We acknowledge it with great shame. But it is utterly clear that this was an abuse of the Christian faith, one that evidently contradicts its true nature. The God in whom we Christians believe is the Creator and Father of all, and from him all people are brothers and sisters and form one single family. For us the Cross of Christ is the sign of the God who put “suffering-with” (compassion) and “loving-with” in place of force. His name is “God of love and peace” (2 Cor 13:11). It is the task of all who bear responsibility for the Christian faith to purify the religion of Christians again and again from its very heart, so that it truly serves as an instrument of God’s peace in the world, despite the fallibility of humans. If one basic type of violence today is religiously motivated and thus confronts religions with the question as to their true nature and obliges all of us to undergo purification, a second complex type of violence is motivated in precisely the opposite way: as a result of God’s absence, his denial and the loss of humanity which goes hand in hand with it. The enemies of religion – as we said earlier – see in religion one of the principal sources of violence in the history of humanity and thus they demand that it disappear. But the denial of God has led to much cruelty and to a degree of violence that knows no bounds, which only becomes possible when man no longer recognizes any criterion or any judge above himself, now having only himself to take as a criterion. The horrors of the concentration camps reveal with utter clarity the consequences of God’s absence. Yet I do not intend to speak further here about state-imposed atheism, but rather about the decline of man, which is accompanied by a change in the spiritual climate that occurs imperceptibly and hence is all the more dangerous. The worship of mammon, possessions and power is proving to be a counter-religion, in which it is no longer man who counts but only personal advantage. The desire for happiness degenerates, for example, into an unbridled, inhuman craving, such as appears in the different forms of drug dependency. There are the powerful who trade in drugs and then the many who are seduced and destroyed by them, physically and spiritually. Force comes to be taken for granted and in parts of the world it threatens to destroy our young people. Because force is taken for granted, peace is destroyed and man destroys himself in this peace vacuum. The absence of God leads to the decline of man and of humanity. But where is God? Do we know him, and can we show him anew to humanity, in order to build true peace? Let us first briefly summarize our considerations thus far. I said that there is a way of understanding and using religion so that it becomes a source of violence, while the rightly lived relationship of man to God is a force for peace. In this context I referred to the need for dialogue and I spoke of the constant need for purification of lived religion. On the other hand I said that the denial of God corrupts man, robs him of his criteria and leads him to violence.

In addition to the two phenomena of religion and anti-religion, a further basic orientation is found in the growing world of **agnosticism**: people to whom the gift of faith has not been given, but who are nevertheless on the lookout for truth, searching for God. Such people do not simply assert: “There is no God”. They suffer from his absence and yet are inwardly making their way towards him, inasmuch as they seek truth and goodness. They are “pilgrims of truth, pilgrims of peace”. They ask questions of both sides. They take away from militant atheists the false certainty by which these claim to know that there is no God and they invite them to leave polemics aside and to become seekers who do not give up hope in the existence of truth and in the possibility and necessity of living by it. But they also challenge the

followers of religions not to consider God as their own property, as if he belonged to them, in such a way that they feel vindicated in using force against others. These people are seeking the truth, they are seeking the true God, whose image is frequently concealed in the religions because of the ways in which they are often practised. Their inability to find God is partly the responsibility of believers with a limited or even falsified image of God. So all their struggling and questioning is in part an appeal to believers to purify their faith, so that God, the true God, becomes accessible.

Therefore I have consciously invited delegates of this third group¹ to our meeting in Assisi, which does not simply bring together representatives of religious institutions. Rather it is a case of being together on a journey towards truth, a case of taking a decisive stand for human dignity and a case of common engagement for peace against every form of destructive force. Finally I would like to assure you that the Catholic Church will not let up in her fight against violence, in her commitment for peace in the world. We are animated by the common desire to be “pilgrims of truth, pilgrims of peace”.

<http://www.news.va/en/news/assisi-2011-a-decisive-stand-for-human-dignity-2>

¹ **Non-believers**, who are not members of "religion" or "anti-religion".